

## The Fall 884

### Chapter 884: Deeper

Even if Zac had succeeded, he did feel a bit conflicted upon seeing the motionless Ferric Worldeaters in his Beast Pouch. Neither of them was actually dead – not really, anyway. At the same time, they weren't quite alive either. The spikes he had embedded into the beast's brain had essentially extinguished its soul and dispersed its consciousness, keeping only a small unconscious shred behind. Meanwhile, the crystal he'd attached to the Beast Core would keep energy circulating through its body, making sure the body would stay alive.

It was a bit macabre, but it was a common practice. Some materials from beasts needed to be freshly harvested when used in crafting, and this was a way to accomplish that without needless suffering. With the help of the arrays, the beast bodies could be kept in suspended animation for decades before they expired.

A series of shuffling steps dragged Zac out of his thoughts, and he turned to Vai who was walking over with a somewhat unsteady gait. She was no longer bleeding from her nose and ears, but she was still deathly pale. It wasn't a surprise – if anything it was a huge accomplishment for a peak E-grade hybrid cultivator to contain a Beast King like Vai had.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked as he ate a Healing Pill.

"My soul was slightly overtaxed, but I will be fine in a day or two," Vai weakly nodded. "Are we done with the hunts, then?"

"We are," Zac nodded. "Thank you for your help. Without you, it would have been impossible to succeed."

"You're welcome," Vai nodded, though she looked a bit conflicted. "However... That specimen... It's..."

"A good, but absolutely common, specimen," Zac nodded with a blank expression.

"Ah?" Vai blurted, her eyes glazing over for a second. "No, that's..."

"Let's get away from here before any more Beast Kings comes to investigate," Zac interjected as he walked away. "Can you collect the mud while I harvest some of the meat from the other Worldeater?"

[Ancestral Woods] was still running, and Zac's smiled a bit when he saw Vai speechlessly open and close her mouth a few times before shaking her head with resignation. He'd already realized the little researcher was unable to deal with that level of shamelessness, and she could only reluctantly head over to harvest the acrid aura-isolating mud.

Meanwhile, Zac walked over to the dead Worldeater, where he harvested the claws and a few easily-accessed pieces of meat. The Beast Core was unfortunately destroyed, a result of Zac intentionally targeting it. That way, it essentially guaranteed he'd take the beast out of commission.

As for the meat, it was travel rations. The Worldeaters looked a bit weird, but their meat was absolutely delicious. Not only that, but it was chock-full of energy since the Beast Kings spent most of their time siphoning energy from Nexus Veins. It was a perfect ingredient for dealing with [Adamance of Eoz], even if it lacked the further refinement of a professional chef.

The two set out just a minute later, rushing toward a nearby cave they had scouted out before. Vai reluctantly covered the entrance with mud while Zac sat down to properly heal his wounds with [Surging Vitality]. His body released creaking sounds as his bones were set and mended, and he eventually released a shuddering breath a few minutes later.

He still wasn't in perfect condition, but it was close enough. The Healing Pill he ate earlier would finish the job over the next couple of hours. Vai had sat down to recuperate as well, and it looked it would be a while longer for her. It gave Zac some time, and he thoughtfully turned his attention toward a node in his head.

Over the past month, he'd fought throngs of Peak E-grade Beasts and even some Beast Kings. His next node had long since reached the threshold, and there was more than enough energy left from the previous battle to finish the job. At the same time, he was in a weakened state from his berserker skill.

Zac hesitated for another minute until he made a decision.

"We'll leave in an hour instead," Zac eventually said, prompting a somewhat surprised Vai to nod.

The original idea was to leave after half an hour, but Zac needed more time if he was to break open another node. He patiently waited another fifty minutes to let the sense of weakness leave his body before he erected the layers of Mental Barriers around the node in his head. From there, he started infusing more and more of his Kill Energy, until the node finally burst open.

The air around him shifted for a moment as [Stone of Hope] activated, averting a good half of the damage. From there, the rest was dealt with by his layered defenses, leaving Zac only with a splitting headache and some minor damage to the pathways. Zac took a shuddering breath as he opened his eyes, and he found Vai looking at him with a gaping mouth.

"You- You are not a Half-Step warrior?" Vai blurted. "But you used a D-grade talisman. No, before that. You forcibly opened a node? What? Wha-"

"You know, it's generally considered impolite to dig into the details of the cultivation of others," Zac smiled as he ate a Soulmending Pill.

"No, I'm... I-" Vai stuttered, looking like her brain had short-circuited trying to reconcile his strength and previous actions with a Late E-grade warrior.

The act of activating a D-grade talisman alone was almost unheard of in the E-grade. Even Zac wouldn't have been able to accomplish that if a single one of his advantages were missing – using Void Energy for [Arcadia's Judgement], or having extra stores of energy thanks to his Draugr side, for example. Even now, he was pushing it.

"Don't worry about it too much," Zac said as he redrew the broken pathways around the node.

Even if the damage wasn't too bad, Zac knew he wouldn't be able to exert more than half of his maximum strength for a few days until his newly-opened node had stabilized. It was a calculated risk. He and Vai had traversed this dour Mystic Realm for over two weeks now, and he was almost certain no lethal threats were hiding in the dark. As long as they made use of Vai's scouting bowl, they should be able to reach the waystation just fine.

It looked like a thousand questions were swirling in Vai's head, even more than after finding out he'd hid his identity. But she eventually managed to restrain her curiosity with a shuddering breath, and instead looked at Zac with worry. "You're really fine? I hear forcibly opening nodes is quite dangerous, especially the last ones."

"I'm used to it," Zac shrugged as he stood up. "Let's go to the nearest Waystation."

Vai slowly nodded, and they set out a moment later. There was still an oppressive silence shrouding the surrounding forest, an unsurprising effect in the wake of the powerful fluctuations from his battle. Of course, sooner or later some of the starving beasts nearby would take the risk and investigate the smell of blood, which would probably be the start of a stampede.

Zac and Vai would thankfully be long gone by then as they made their way through the forest – with Zac running while carrying Vai in a vine seat by his side, guiding him and keeping watch for threats. It was a bit reminiscent of a similar situation way back, and it filled Zac with mixed emotions. However, Vai wasn't Leviala, and he believed he could trust Vai even when push came to shove.

By the time the two reached the Waystation a few days later, Zac was already back to almost perfect condition. It was perfect timing, as there was still the small chance of invaders hiding in there, even if the two still hadn't seen any indications that would support that theory.

Thankfully, they found the station deserted, though there were signs that someone had passed through the area not too long ago – steps that had kicked up a thin layer of dust. The two made a proper sweep of the compound, but there were no real indications if it had been invaders or templars who had left the imprints.

But seeing as the failing maintenance arrays hadn't been reset for some reason, Vai suspected the former. The fact that the dust wasn't being swept likely meant the base was running low on power. Templars would likely have added a set of crystals to make sure the waystation kept functioning until someone could come and investigate why the base didn't draw energy from the Mystic Realm. Luckily, the mapper was in working order, at least.

"I don't recognize this at all compared to the last one we looked at. Can you tell where we are?" Zac eventually asked, prompting the researcher to take out one of her tomes.

"We seem to be at the edge of the cortex's domain," Vai said after studying the map for a minute. "We have skipped over five layers, it looks like. But that isn't the real problem. We might be stuck here for a while..."

"What's going on?"

"Our region has been cut off by the cortex failing," Vai said as she pointed at a large section of dark circles. "And there doesn't seem to be an easy way to double back. The realms might reconnect after the area calms down in a month or two, but it might not. It depends on how far the Mystic Realms have been moved, and I don't have any way to measure that."

"So there's no way out?"

"Not the way we came," Vai said with a shake of her head, looking a bit fearful. "We would have to keep traveling and explore the map for alternative routes, hoping infiltrators haven't ruined those paths as

well. And I'm not confident I can calculate the correct path with all these unstable factors taking place... I..."

"Well, I'm not really heading out," Zac shrugged. "So that's not a problem."

"What?" Vai blurted. "No, we need to get out, or at least find a captain! These are the inner parts of the Void Star – this place is extremely dangerous! You're strong, but there are Late-Stage Beast Kings and terrifying environments."

Zac was a bit conflicted as he looked at the frazzled researcher, not sure what the best solution was. Even if there were dangers, he was still adamant about following the signal of the Left Imperial Palace. Bringing Vai along would be for the best as well. Not only did she have that superpowered defensive bubble, but she was also his best bet of getting out in one piece.

But he also felt he was asking a bit much of her by dragging her along on this dangerous mission.

Should he try to bring her out first? But according to her, it was quite a journey, and it might even take him in the wrong direction. There was no guarantee he'd be able to make his way back to the pulse with how these Mystic Realms shifted. The same was true if he managed to hand her over to some elite squad – they wouldn't just let him run off on his own.

"Alright, here's the deal," Zac eventually said. "I can't leave this place just yet, and I can't guarantee I'll be heading in the direction we need to get out of here."

"What?" Vai said with confusion written all over her face. "Why not?"

"Like I said earlier, I need to find something," Zac explained. "It's extremely important."

"Something in the inner regions of the Void Star?" Vai slowly muttered as she gave Zac a deep gaze. "Do you know where it is? I can check the map..."

"I don't," Zac interjected. "That's why it's dangerous. You are welcome to follow me if you want, and I will do my best to keep you safe. But it might be a better idea for you to stay here and wait for rescue."

"That's crazy! Even if you can survive the environment, how would you even find it?" Vai said as she looked at Zac like he was a madman.

"Don't worry, I have my methods," Zac said.

Vai slowly calmed down, and she thoughtfully looked at Zac until she finally spoke again. "Will you taking this thing harm the Void Gate?"

"I don't think so," Zac said after some thought. "If anything, me removing it from this place will probably save the life of anyone stumbling onto it."

"Alright, I'm coming with you, and then we'll leave together," Vai nodded with a determined expression.

"You don't have to force yourself," Zac said. "Staying here-"

"Those invaders might appear at any moment," Vai countered. "I'm not safe here either. Besides, how would you even get where you want without me?"

“What do you mean? I’ll just use the gates?” Zac said with confusion.

“The token of yours will only provide limited access to a small number of waystations,” Vai said with a roll of her eyes. “Our pathways might not normally be locked, but what about now, when there are invaders in here? You might find yourself suddenly stuck in the depths of the Void Star, trapped for years.”

“I could borrow-” Zac muttered as he looked at Vai’s token.

“Doesn’t work,” Vai interjected. “They are marked with blood.”

“Alright, I guess I’ll be depending on you, then,” Zac said with a weak smile as he turned off the mapper.

“Can you tell me what you’re looking for?” Vai asked as they walked toward the gates.

Zac hesitated a bit before answering. “I can’t tell you exactly what it is, it’s dangerous. But I have a quest to gather something.”

“Did you get the quest here?” Vai asked.

“No,” Zac lied. “But I found one part on the way.”

“You did?” Vai muttered with confusion before. “When... Hako Lake! The breach!”

Zac was impressed by how quickly the researcher put two and two together. He was about to compliment her, but Zac almost stumbled when he saw an extremely indignant expression on her face. Zac wryly smiled, suddenly remembering the bite marks that Vai had suffered. He had tried his best to shield her, but with billions of critters, some were bound to pass through the net.

“I didn’t know taking that thing would conjure an insect tide,” Zac coughed. “Next time, we’ll be prepared.”

“Alright,” Vai muttered, obviously still holding onto a ball of complaints as she stepped over to the control console. “Which tunnel?”

Zac thought back to the map earlier, which had indicated this waystation had access to two different Mystic Realms, each one leading further into the Void Star.

“Uh, can you open both? That way I’ll step through and check it out,” Zac asked.

“That’s why you looked so weird every time we entered a new Mystic Realm!” Vai exclaimed. “You always stopped and looked like you had stomach pains.”

“Well,” Zac grimaced, realizing he hadn’t been quite as circumspect as he’d thought.

A moment later, two of the gates activated, showing almost identical rooms on the other side. Just from his vantage, Zac couldn’t feel whether one was better than the other.

Zac picked the one on the left first and stepped through, and a pulse of confirmation immediately told him that this realm was closer to his target than the other. He visited the other one as well, where a second pulse greeted him. However, this one was even weaker than the shrouded Mystic Realm, meaning it was even further away.

“This one,” Zac said, pointing to the left gate as he stepped back to where a curious Vai waited for him.

The researcher quickly nodded and closed the second gate before the two passed through. The new realm didn’t seem to have any special attunement, but its energy was quite dense – a clear middle D-grade realm at that. There was also no sign of anyone having visited this waystation for quite some time, meaning no squads had pushed this deep as far as they could see.

“This one might be a bit dangerous,” Zac muttered as he felt the dense energies swirl around them. “Do you have any notes on these places?”

“I don’t have a complete tally of all the Mystic Realms in this place,” Vai said with a shake of her head. “The inner regions are normally only visited by the elites. I just have some books about interesting phenomena in various realms, places worth of study.”

Zac nodded before taking out his attention-averting cowl. “Here, wear this. It’ll hopefully make any beasts ignore you.”

“What about you?” Vai asked with worry.

“I’ll be fine. I’m not so easily killed,” Zac smiled. “Besides, I have more similar treasures.”

It was true, his bracer had a similar function, which had allowed him to pass through the Coral Forest in the Twilight Ocean almost unimpeded. The only beasts that had bothered him were those who attacked him out of malice, while most didn’t care about a small creature that didn’t emit any spirituality or energy.

The two left the Waystation a while later and found themselves at the edge of an odd jungle that stretched as far as the eye could see. There were no suns in the sky, but they could actually see thousands of smaller orbs of green light on top of some of the tree crowns. In contrast to the previous Mystic Realm, it was almost blindingly bright, though the atmosphere wasn’t sweltering.

The shimmering orbs didn’t seem to radiate heat, and instead contained massive amounts of nature-attuned energies that created a refreshing atmosphere that had to be perfect for a flourishing jungle.

“It’s a primal garden,” Vai whispered with wide eyes. “This place is dangerous, it’s full of-”

A roar so powerful that it kicked up a literal storm in the area interrupted Vai’s warning. Even Zac’s hair stood on end when he felt the enormous power contained in the howl. There was no way it came from an early D-grade Beast unless it had an exceedingly powerful bloodline. Unless the roar was all bluster, Zac definitely wasn’t confident in taking it on.

But that small hope was soon dashed. Something else in the jungle had been angered by the Beast King’s outburst, and a piercing screech answered the roar, this one containing just as much power. The two soundwaves clashing even kicked up a storm, and Zac wondered if were about to witness an apocalyptic battle between two monstrous Beast Kings.

“Let me guess,” Zac sighed. “It’s full of Beast Kings?”